

# 10/14/2013: State of the Big Ten, Volume 102 (premium)

*Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.*

By Brendan Stiles

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When the AP top 25 was released this past Sunday, it showed just two ranked teams from the Big Ten. Ohio State remained fourth in the poll as it has been for weeks, while Wisconsin climbed back in at the No. 25 spot following a 35-6 drubbing of Northwestern at Camp Randall Stadium.

Solely looking at it from the perspective of "top 25," the conference has been ridiculed because there's only two teams and one just barely made it. But then look at the "others receiving votes" category and the first three teams listed as just outside the top 25 are Michigan (who fell out of the poll after losing in four overtimes to Penn State), Nebraska and Michigan State. So yes, the Big Ten has just two teams in the top 25. It also has five teams in the top 28.

There's a reason for bringing this up. Actually, there are two reasons. The first reason for bringing this up has to do with one of those teams currently ranked, which is Ohio State. Looking at the Buckeyes' remaining schedule on paper, it looks weak. But keep in mind how they just played two league games out of the gate against Wisconsin and Northwestern, both of whom were ranked at the times they each played the Buckeyes.

This is going to get brought up because when the first batch

of BCS rankings are released Sunday, they're going to show Ohio State – assuming it beats Iowa this weekend – listed somewhere in the top 5, but probably not at No. 2 and certainly not at No. 1. The schedule will continue to be brought up as a hinderance to the Buckeyes' cause, even if they played a ranked Michigan team on Nov. 30 in Ann Arbor, followed by a ranked Legends Division squad (perhaps Michigan again or either a Nebraska or Michigan State) in the Big Ten Championship Game at Indianapolis' Lucas Oil Stadium.

Here's the other role that needs to be considered here, and this is regardless of whether Ohio State were to play in Pasadena on Jan. 1 or Jan. 6 – getting two teams in BCS bowls. The idea might be scoffed at right now, but it's not totally out of the realm of possibility for the Big Ten, either.

Let's say for argument's sake that Wisconsin runs the table (which isn't far-fetched when looking at the Badgers' remaining schedule) and finishes 10-2 overall and 7-1 in Big Ten play, but doesn't get to play in Indianapolis because Ohio State goes 8-0 and wins the Leaders Division. If this scenario came to fruition, the thought that Wisconsin wouldn't have earned an at-large bid would be foolish. The same could be said for whoever ends up winning the Legends Division if that team lost to the Buckeyes in the title game.

In all likelihood, the SEC, Pac-12 and ACC are each going to have two BCS teams this season. That leaves one remaining spot, which won't go to a second Big 12 team and won't go to Notre Dame this time around. The two threats standing in the way of the Big Ten here would be either an undefeated Fresno State or an undefeated Northern Illinois, even if neither team is actually as good as a Wisconsin might end up being.

If either the Bulldogs or Huskies meet the same criteria Northern Illinois managed to meet last year en route to receiving an Orange Bowl invite, then the Big Ten would have the team left out. But if both teams play their way out of an

at-large invite, who else is going to fill it? It'd be there for a second Big Ten team if it handled its business between now and Dec. 8 when the match-ups all get announced.

The Big Ten definitely has its issues, make no mistake. But it's a better conference now football-wise than it was a year ago and while there are only two teams ranked at the moment, there could be anywhere from 4-5 (maybe even 6) ranked in the top 25 when the season ends. It all remains to be seen obviously, but the league isn't as bad as it's perceived to be in the national scope.